

Network to Work Meeting – June 2021

RESOURCE DOCUMENT

Professional References

What is a Professional Reference?

A professional reference is someone who can vouch for your qualifications for a job, your employability and your work-related skills, qualities and experience.

An employer may seek a reference for any of these reasons:

- To learn about your character, personality and work ethic.
- To verify that you were truthful about the history or educational experience that you provided in your application or resume.
- To check your background, qualifications and prove your identity.
- To check if you'd be a good fit for their organization in terms of your qualifications and personality.

Usually your reference will be a former employer, a colleague, a client, a vendor, a supervisor, or someone else who can recommend you for employment.

A personal reference speaks to your personal characteristics and qualities. They should NOT be used when applying for a job.

An Ideal Reference

When decided on who to ask to be your reference, think about the job(s) you are looking for. What skills and attributes are required for that job? Your reference should be able to speak from experience and talk about how you demonstrate those skills and attribute. You want your reference to be able to provide examples of your past work. A vaguely positive reference to your strengths is not enough.

Do you have any notable, successful workplace experiences? Look for a reference who can speak about that success and how you made it happen.

Ideally, you don't want to have a reference from someone you worked with more than five to seven years ago. If you go further back, your reference may find it difficult to remember you and the specifics about your job performance. This is important; you want to be sure your reference can give details. It won't help you if all they can say is something like *"All I really remember about Mary is that she did a pretty good job. However, I just don't remember any specifics."*

What to do if you Don't have References?

If you have been out of work for many months or years, get creative with your references. If you have past references, reach out to them. Update them on your more recent work, volunteer and training experiences – such as your SCSEP training – and discuss with them your current and updated skills.

Possible references include former bosses, co-workers, subordinates and customers you worked closely with in a past job. If you have only had one job in your past, it is okay to ask more than one person from that employer to be your reference.

Here's what you might say in your request:

"Ted, I'm in the job market and it's been a tough go. I'd like to put you down as a reference even though it has been many years since we worked together. May we have a conversation about me and see if you're in a position to vouch for me and for the work I did for you? If you are, I'd like to update you on my recent experiences and current skills, so you know where I am now."

References are looking for professional opinions about you, so they should come from people you have worked with in some capacity, even if you weren't paid. So you can also ask individuals you worked with in a volunteer capacity to be your reference.

Here's another possibility. If you are working with a counselor at your local Career Center or American Job Center / One Stop, consider asking that person to be a reference. They can speak to your ethics – whether you come to appointments on time, how hard you are trying to find work, etc.

Finally, don't forget that A4TD can be a reference for you.

The Reference Itself

Before you put someone down as your reference, make sure they are comfortable providing a positive reference for you. Ask them. Also, ask them what they might say. Ideally, you should ask these questions in an email or other written form so that someone who might be reluctant to provide a reference can more comfortably turn down your request. You want a reference who will give you a strong endorsement.

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